

VZCZCXRO3465  
PP RUEHPW  
DE RUEHBUL #3190/01 3460820  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 110820Z DEC 08  
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6382  
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003190

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, S/CRS  
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG  
NSC FOR JWOOD  
OSD FOR MCGRAW  
CG CJTF-101, POLAD, JICCENT

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: UNDERSTANDING IRREGULARITIES IN VOTER REGISTRATION

REF: KABUL 3106

¶1. (SBU) By December 13, 24 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces will have completed the voter registration update exercise. To date, observed irregularities and partisan quibbles alike revolve around the politically-sensitive question of Pashtun participation. This dynamic makes Phases 3 and 4, in the remaining ten provinces in the Pashtun-dominated east and south, a bellwether for popular acceptance of the electoral process as legitimate.

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SMALL LIES ...  
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¶2. (SBU) UN election staff consider fraud to date in voter registration quite limited, with reported cases appearing in only Logar and Paktya, two of the 24 provinces of Phase 1 and Phase 2. As reported reftel, UNAMA field officers cite credible reports that in these provinces, where Pashtun tribes dominate, men provided lists of women's names to registration workers and received voter cards in return. The women never appeared at the registration site to prove their identity or provide fingerprints. The numbers of new women voters in Logar and Paktya are anomalous, with rates running at over 60 percent of total new registrants. UN political experts are studying the data and will forward their conclusions to the Independent Elections Commission (IEC.)

¶3. (SBU) The coalition of Afghan NGOs observing the process, FEFA, has some 350 observers on the ground and presented similar conclusions in its December 6 press conference. FEFA described voter registration as successful and sound overall. Its observers reported the following types of fraud and procedural flaws, in descending frequency: registration of voters under 18; multiple registrations; distribution of blank registration forms; and issuance of cards intended for wives to their husbands, as above. Very rarely, FEFA observed partisan bias among registration staff. The IEC conducted self-monitoring missions in Kabul, Balkh, Kunduz, Baghlan, and Samangan provinces, but these conclusions are not yet known.

¶4. (SBU) The observed and reported voter registration fraud in itself will have little or no impact on the outcome of the election. The key safeguards on election day against multiple voting are the integrity of polling center staff and the use of indelible ink. For voters to use multiple cards as an excuse to conduct multiple or proxy voting, as occurred in 2005, polling center staff must acquiesce in de-linking one voter, one card, one vote. As for stuffing ballot boxes and fudging vote counts, the IEC is leaning toward counting votes at polling centers, which will provide the detailed results data that itself exposes such attempts at fraud.

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...AND STATISTICS  
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¶15. (SBU) Mark Twain's quip, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics," applies to the problem of gauging the number of Pashtun voters and their participation in the electoral process. The government's Central Statistics Office has not conducted a recent census and even overall population estimates are shaky. The population density map most used by US forces, for example, shows a crisp line along the famously porous southern border with Pakistan, reflecting incomplete underlying data for Afghanistan. The Afghan national identification card does record ethnic identity, but many citizens do not have this document. The IEC does not indicate ethnic identity on voter registration cards nor keep any record of a registrant's claimed ethnicity. Thus, no one knows how many Pashtuns reside in the country, how many Pashtuns are of voting age, or how many Pashtuns have or will obtain voter registration cards. Even data to make reliable estimates do not exist.

¶16. (SBU) A lack of useful information has not kept various commentators from dark speculations about possible Pashtun disenfranchisement. Some are spuriously specific, citing totals and percentages, and others rely on geography as a proxy to ethnicity, tagging certain districts or provinces as wholly Pashtun. The accounts of these analysts seem to track most closely with political predilection and ethnic identity. Ghazni and Herat, for example, both contain a mix of ethnic

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populations. A Pashtun political observer in Kabul, however, recently opined that Ghazni's security problems disenfranchised Pashtuns exclusively, while Herat's relatively low participation in the voter update reflected a disproportionately large baseline number of registered Tajiks and Hazaras.

¶17. (SBU) President Karzai has been especially focused on the conduct of voter registration, and ultimately the election, in Helmand province. He views the credibility of the election overall through the lens of how the process is conducted in Helmand. In fact, in the 2004 election, Helmand comprised only 3.6 percent of the overall vote in the country, and 6 percent of Karzai's total vote. In contrast, the much smaller Nangarhar province, which is also predominately Pashtun, comprised 10 percent of Karzai's overall votes.

¶18. (SBU) Perception, therefore, is key to popular acceptance of the electoral process as legitimate. Voter registration in the predominately Pashtun areas of the east and south, in Phases 3 and 4, will for many serve as a barometer of Pashtun participation overall. If the process goes smoothly in larger population centers, such as Lashkar Gah, Kandahar city, and Tarin Kowt, and takes place at all in the sparsely-populated rural and desert regions, many will accept that fairness is at play.  
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